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ABSTRACT

The emphasis in this paper is on developing teacher awareness of how nonverbal communication fits into the classroom setting. Various positive and negative aspects of this phase of communication in the classroom are explored. A classroom teacher is observed closely by students every day, and her/his attitude, feelings, mood or state of mind, communicated nonverbally, are interpreted and reacted to by the class. Positive feelings, such as enthusiasm, happiness, and interest are conveyed easily by the teacher's posture, facial expressions and movements. A teacher's concern for, and acceptance of, students can create a classroom atmosphere that will encourage similar positive feelings in students. Negative attitudes, prejudices, and biases are also clearly disclosed nonverbally. Teachers, also, read the nonverbal communications coming from students. Comprehension, understanding, interest, and involvement as opposed to puzzlement, misunderstanding, boredom, and withdrawal can have an extremely important influence upon the teacher's decisions in regard to possible changes in strategy in presenting classroom material. Nonverbal behaviors indicating possible disciplinary problems arising can be clearly read by a teacher. Fully comprehending the effect of both verbal and nonverbal behavior upon the quality of learning that occurs in the classroom enables a teacher to promote a desirable teaching-learning process and closer teacher-student relationships. (JD)

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IMPROVING THE TEACHER'S AWARENESS of NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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Understanding the full impact of communication on the teaching-learning process, as it occurs in the classroom environment, implies a knowledge of the influence of the nonverbal as well as verbal behaviors on the participants involved in the interaction. Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs give so much attention to the verbal elements of teaching that one might conclude that teacher educators are not aware that communication has both verbal and nonverbal dimensions. One might assume from the emphasis in most teacher training programs, that without a speaking voice an individual could never become a teacher. Closer observation of classroom interactions, however, reveals another form of communication, sometimes referred to as the "silent language," which has a more profound effect on the quality of interaction and learning than words alone could ever achieve.

Although the effect of nonverbal behaviors on communication is apparent, many teacher educators still question just how the awareness of such behaviors will contribute to the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. This is demonstrated by the existing lack of systematic plans for training teachers in the interpretation of nonverbal behavior in the classroom and the limited amount of research on nonverbal communication that applies to the field of education. Yet, examination of any school setting quickly illustrates the need for developing teachers' awareness of the nonverbal behaviors and for studying the implications of such behaviors on the educational process.

This "silent language" is occurring continually as a part of the communicative process wherever individuals interact whether it be in the classroom or in the corridors of the school; in the teachers' lounge or the principal's office; in the library, cafeteria or janitor's room; on the playground or the school's parking lot. The classroom alone represents a hotbed of nonverbal activity as illustrated by such aspects as: classroom appearance and atmosphere, teacher and student moods and feelings, teacher reinforcement and motivation behaviors, teacher disciplinary strategies, student dress, and student attempts to appear attentive, busy or behaving. In order to provide increased awareness of how these nonverbal behaviors fit into classroom interaction, attention in this paper will be devoted to the messages students observe their teachers communicating nonverbally and the messages the teachers observe their students communicating nonverbally.

WHAT STUDENTS OBSERVE

A classroom teacher is observed closely by students every day. Each student screens and interprets a variety of nonverbal messages communicated by the teacher which reveals a great deal about the latter's true self and individual style. From the moment the teacher enters the students' presence, they are guaging what that teacher's attitude, feelings, mood, or state of mind might be at that very moment. Such determination by students is very important to understand since subsequent behaviors may largely be determined by what is observed of the teacher. For example, if the students notice an

air of happiness about the teacher, they may initiate conversation with the teacher and even assume closer proximity to the teacher. Whereas, if the teacher appears irritable or upset, students may refrain from approaching the teacher and avoid any unnecessary interaction with the teacher. Although research is lacking on what dimensions students base their judgments, the authors believe that the gait and posture of the teacher, the facial expressions and the tone of voice are most instrumental in student determination of the teacher's attitude or feeling. The teacher who enters a room with loose gait and rather erect posture, who smiles and greets students with a pleasant "Good Morning" communicates nonverbally a positive mood and attitude. Students get a distinctly different message from the teacher who enters the room with shuffling feet, holding poor posture, a long drawn face, and in a depressing tone of voice greets them with, "Get your books out."

The teacher's enthusiasm for a given subject, lesson topic, or class can largely be determined by scrutinizing various nonverbal behaviors. Evidence of teacher enthusiasm is demonstrated by greater variation in tone of voice, more positive anticipatory facial expressions, more rapidity in presentation speed, increased movement both in gesturing and location about the room, and more direct eye contact with students. By contrast, it is doubtful that the teacher assigned to teach a subject he detests to a class of students that academically or behavior-wise he despises, would be effective in conveying enthusiasm for the task. What impact will the students' perception of either teacher have upon the teaching-learning process?

Reinforcement and motivation are communicated both verbally and nonverbally, however, their impact and effectiveness are definitely influenced by the nonverbal meaningfulness given on their behalf. Teacher verbal statements such as, "Good work," "Try again," "I know you can do it," or "Let's see if you can do this yourself," are messages whose real influence as motivators or reinforcers must be supported by similar nonverbal teacher messages in order to have maximum affect. A reassuring smile, a mutual glance, a touch of support on the arm, shoulder, back, or head of the student, a positive teacher tone of voice, or a nod of the head, all can be read as that sincere and genuine belief on the part of the teacher in the verbal message communicated to the student. As Torrance[1] found in his study, students have a tendency to pay particular attention to the sincerity of messages by attuning to the nonverbal messages of the teacher to see if they support the verbal.

Teacher concern for and acceptance of students is primarily measured through the actions of the teacher rather than what the teacher says. Does the teacher notice those students who need personal help or attention? Does the teacher devote time and effort to help those students? The amount of attention and the interest the teacher demonstrates in helping students are important measures a student relies upon in judging the teacher's concern for and receptivity to him. Teachers can do much to personalize and communicate their concern and acceptance of students through eye contact according to Hodge[2].

The prejudices and biases teachers hold are frequently revealed through their nonverbal behaviors while interacting with students. The teacher may never verbally communicate to any student a personal disliking, or a feeling that a student is intellectually, physically, or socially inferior. For the teacher to verbally state such feelings is tantamount to unethical and unprofessional behavior. The sad truth is teachers are human, they do have certain biases and prejudices and no matter how hard they try to hide them, the nonverbal channels of behavior often leak out to students the teacher's dislikes, expectations, or judgments. Research has shown that those things an individual finds attractive are revealed by the individual's nonverbal behaviors. In other words, one tends to look more at attractive things or persons, spend more time around such attractiveness, and move closer toward or even touch that found to be attractive. In applying this to classroom settings, one can quickly understand how teachers may communicate biases through "approach or avoidance" behaviors, whether in distance, time, observation, or touch. Such messages are read loud and clear by those students receiving such communication.

The findings of Rosenthal and Jacobsen[3] on how teacher expectations affect student performance are directly related to observations discussed above. If the teacher holds high expectations for students, they tend to perform better despite their academic ability. Although the authors found no difference related to the amount of time a teacher spends with students, they did conjecture that nonverbal dimensions of facial expressions, posture, touch, and how and when

teacher statements were made all served as possible influences on the phenomenon of expectancy transmission.

The ability to maintain high pupil attention and interest levels seems to be directly related to how the teacher varies certain nonverbal behaviors during instruction. These modifications, sometimes referred to as stimulus variation, affect the climate for learning and generally promote increased student enthusiasm as the teacher moves about the room using more hand, head and body movements, focusing student attention through gesturing or voice intonation, altering interaction styles, pausing during a presentation, or shifting sensory channels from one mode of communication to another during the lesson.

In relationship to classroom management, students pay close attention to their teacher's nonverbal behaviors in order to determine how aware they are of certain student behaviors and whether they approve or disapprove of these behaviors. A variety of teacher behaviors are used to maintain classroom control. These include teacher usage of eye contact, facial expressions, or movement near students. The timing and intensity of such behaviors can be very effective in deterring or promoting the kind of student behaviors desired by the teacher. In fact, students have a tendency to rely heavily upon their teacher's nonverbal behaviors as an accurate interpretation of disciplinary intent.

Even the classroom environment plays an instrumental role in terms of the nonverbal dimension of communication. The physical conditions of the classroom, including furnishings and arrangements,

affect the kind and quality of communication and learning that take place. Sommer[4] found that various classroom settings and seating arrangements affected student participation and thinking. For example, he found that fewer students participated in seminar type arrangements but that the level of thoughtful discussion was greater. The opposite was true in straight-rowed classrooms where more students participated but the level of thoughtful discussion was not as great. In conventional classroom settings, he found that student participation was greater in the first row and center sections of other rows than the outer and back rows.

WHAT TEACHERS OBSERVE

The study of nonverbal communication, as it applies to classroom settings, must also include what teachers observe students communicating. Teachers continually make judgments while teaching, on how successfully they are communicating. These judgments are largely based on nonverbal cues they receive from their students. After presenting an idea or asking a question, the teacher looks to see if students are nonverbally indicating comprehension, understanding, interest and involvement; as opposed to puzzlement, misunderstanding, boredom and withdrawal. Such nonverbal messages have an extremely important influence upon the teacher's on-the-spot decisions. There are many transition points where the teacher must decide whether to go on with a particular lesson or point, repeat the point, change the instructional strategy, pause for questions, or go back to the previous point. The teacher may also detect other attending behaviors of students by focusing on their nonverbal messages. For example, the teacher might notice who is daydreaming, avoiding eye

contact, intent in their work or easily distracted by others. All of these have implications and may effect what the teacher decides to do next.

The teacher must also note nonverbal signs indicating student feelings and their possible need for help. Most students want to communicate with their teachers but are not always able to put into words their real thoughts and feelings. Ordinarily, these nonverbal messages are clear despite the lack of verbalization; the student's frown, head tilt, facial expressions, posture, and other related gestures truly communicate his state of need.

The classroom teacher must also learn to watch for nonverbal behaviors which tip off disciplinary problems that are arising or occurring. For example, the teacher may observe students who are engaging in such behaviors as using their desk tops as a shield, congregating near the pencil sharpener, passing notes, fiddling under their desks, or bothering others. The teacher who wishes to maintain an atmosphere of positive classroom management must be very observant of these signs and indications of a possible breakdown in disciplinary control.

Teachers learn to read student feelings toward them, the subject being taught, and each other through visual observation of their nonverbal behaviors. This implies the study of group patterns and social interaction in the classroom. It includes awareness of the nature of teacher-student contact and the efforts students give to their subjects. Student aggression and avoidance behaviors in the nonverbal realm of communication gives credence to observations of the student's actual feelings.

Many students practice deceptive behaviors in order to sustain a particular image of cooperation, likeability or intelligence. These deceptions can be discovered through increased observation of student nonverbal behaviors. Students are quick to learn what behaviors are appropriate to give the impression of looking busy at their desks, attentive during a lesson, or ready for dismissal. Deceptive practices may include lying, cheating, or covering up on the part of the student in order to portray the desired image to the teacher. Each student has basic needs for belonging to a group, being seen favorably by the teacher, and having feelings of personal significance as an individual in the classroom. The student will do everything in his power to meet these and other basic needs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the emphasis in this paper on developing teacher awareness of how nonverbal communication fits into the classroom setting is not suggested merely to encourage teachers to learn how to control their behaviors nor simply to explore their use for manipulating others. The basic goal was to assist teachers in comprehending the various positive and negative aspects of this phase of communication in the classroom and to gain a better understanding of why students self act and react as they do. As teachers develop a greater awareness of the impact of nonverbal communication, they better understand students and are themselves better understood by students. They more fully comprehend the effect that communication, both verbal and nonverbal, has upon the quality of interaction and the learning that occurs in the classroom. Once this comprehension

occurs, the teacher is at a point where conscious and subconscious changes in his attitudes and actions may begin to develop and can result in the promotion of more desirable teaching-learning processes and closer teacher-student relationships.

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